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Stephen Tierney: New ESRC Research Projects Address the Future of the UK and Scotland

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The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has in the past two weeks appointed seven one year senior fellowships with overall funding of £1.3 million (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/24317/fellows-to-look-at-the-future-of-the-uk-and-scotland.aspx>). This has all happened very quickly, with the call only appearing in July. With a referendum on Scottish Independence due to be held in 2014, the ESRC is clearly keen to facilitate high level research with which to help inform public debate and policy-making well in advance of the poll.

The seven selected fellows are:

- Dr Angus Armstrong, National Institute of Economic and Social Research, Currency and fiscal policy options for an independent Scotland
- Professor David Bell, University of Stirling, Fiscal aspects of constitutional change
- Professor John Curtice, National Centre for Social Research, Public attitudes and Scotland's independence referendum
- Professor Michael Keating, University of Aberdeen, Constitutional futures and models of policy making
- Dr Nicola McEwen, University of Edinburgh, Between autonomy and interdependence: Scottish independence and intergovernmental co-ordination
- Professor Sheila Riddell, University of Edinburgh, Higher education in Scotland, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence
- Professor Stephen Tierney, University of Edinburgh, The referendum on Scottish independence: a democratic audit

These seven projects clearly represent a wide range of work addressing the economic and fiscal implications of independence, public attitudes and education. It is notable also that three projects have a strongly constitutional dimension: my own project which will track the referendum bill and other enabling legislation as it passes through the Scottish Parliament, assessing the proposed referendum process against best international practice; that of Michael Keating, looking at different models of policy making under different constitutional scenarios; and Nicola McEwen's which will consider the possible implications of Scottish independence for ongoing intergovernmental co-ordination across the UK territory.

The ESRC has already committed to other programmes looking at devolution and sees this scheme as fitting into this wider programme of work addressing issues around the future of Scotland and the UK in broad terms. As it states in its publicity material: 'The programme aims to both inform the debate in the run-up to the referendum and assist in planning across a wide range of areas which will be affected by the outcome of the vote, whether for independence or the Union. These include voting, culture and identity, business intelligence, fiscal and monetary policy, policy development, building of new constitutional arrangements, and defence and administrative practice.'

A number of the Senior Fellows already have plans to hold events targeted at civil society and the general public, as well as to disseminate important information by way of websites etc. I intend that my own project will involve cooperation with, and coordination of events through, the Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law and the SCFF; 2013 promises to be a very busy year for the Futures Forum and the website will continue to publicise events as they are organised.

The most important conclusion to draw however, as the public continue to be confused by conflicting reports in the press of a number of constitutional issues, is that a substantial body of research is now building and a wide range of public engagement is now taking place across Scotland and the wider UK ahead of 2014; this can only be positive in helping to inform citizens about the choices they face.

Stephen Tierney is Professor Constitutional Theory at the University of Edinburgh

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